Siblings and Out-of-Home Placement: Best Practices

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Abstract

This article is based on research and practice experience from projects and cases in both public child welfare agencies and private adoption agencies. Here, the authors summarize the research on sibling relationships, including a description of sibling relationships in families where children have been abused and neglected. The authors also discuss the barriers in child welfare that can result in the separation of siblings. Finally, they offer best practice solutions that support maintaining sibling relationships throughout temporary and permanent placement. An assessment tool to assist in the decision-making process for the placement of siblings is also included. This tool will help practitioners think systematically about the placement of siblings in order to make the best decisions.

MOST CHILDREN GROW UP WITH SIBLINGS. The time they spend together in their early years is often greater than the time they spend with their parents. It is a complex relationship (Pfouts, 1976) that often lasts for a lifetime, longer than most marriages and parent–child relationships (Dunn, 1985). Even though sibling relations may be very strong, peaceful, or fun at some points and weak, conflictual, or intense at others, a person's personal identity is interwoven with his or her siblings.

Unfortunately, in situations of abuse and neglect where children have been placed in alternative-care settings, sibling relationships are at risk of interruption and, in some cases, termination. When children are removed from their home, child welfare workers face the daunting task of trying to minimize the trauma to children by choosing placement settings that will best meet their needs, including their need to sustain sibling attachments. Although child welfare practitioners recognize the importance of the sibling bond, sustaining the sibling relationship continues to be a challenge in practice.

The decisions regarding sibling placements have become even more critical. New legislation, including the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997), has limited the amount of time parents have to work on case plan issues and reunify with their children. As a result, children are moving more quickly into permanent adoptive homes. For siblings separated in temporary care, this limits their chances of reuniting with each other while in foster care. Also, with more foster parents being given the first option of adopting, for siblings not placed together, their chances of being reunited in an adoptive home decrease. In essence, opportunities for children coming into care to sustain their sibling ties are limited if decisions to keep them together are not made from the beginning of placement.

In this article, we address the issues surrounding sibling ties and include a description of sibling relationships in families where children have been abused and neglected. We also discuss sibling placement and the barriers in child welfare that can result in the separation of siblings. Finally, we offer best practice solutions that support maintaining sibling

relationships throughout temporary and permanent placement. An assessment tool has been included to assist in the decision-making process for the placement of siblings.

Sibling Relationships

Sibling relations exert considerable influence on individual development (Bank & Kahn, 1982; LePere, Davis, Couve, & McDonald, 1986; Pfouts, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1982). In early childhood, siblings are companions and playmates. Through games, conversations with each other, and conflicts, they learn to interact with others, solve problems, and negotiate. During the early school years, the sibling relationship continues to be emotionally intense for many children and persists as an ongoing developmental influence (Ambramovitch, Pepler, & Corter, 1982). Older siblings assist younger siblings in the transition to school both by acting as a role model and by giving information about the experience. Older siblings are also attachment figures for younger siblings. Stewart and Marvin (1984) indicated that by the end of preschool years older children serve as subsidiary attachment figures for their younger siblings.

Sibling relations are not without conflict, a normal part of the relationship (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982b). Conflict provides opportunities to learn flexibility, negotiation, and fair play (Bank & Kahn, 1982). These skills are used in relationships throughout childhood with family and peers, and as adults with spouses, friends, and colleagues. Though it's unclear how much sibling relationships affect adult personality, the power of the relationship lasts far past childhood, withstands separations of time and space, and provides emotional strength for most people in later life stages (Cicirelli, 1982; Hegar, 1988). Contact with siblings in late adulthood provides a sense of nearness, belonging, and the assurance of attachment to a family. In old age, the cycle of the sibling bond comes full circle. It provides a shield against the insecurity of aging and the loss of parents (Dunn, 1985; Hegar, 1988).

Although these aspects of sibling relations exist in well-functioning families, both the positive and negative aspects of relations are intensified in problematic and dysfunctional families. Often children grow more attached to their siblings when they have experienced severe parental losses, neglect, or abuse. Their attachment is greater than the attachment shown by siblings who have not experienced such losses (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982). In these families, children learn early to depend upon and cooperate with each other in order to cope (Hochman, Feathers-Acuna, & Huston, 1992).

Families in transition as a result of child placement because of abuse or neglect enter into a period of restructuring, which can create an environment of tension and vulnerability for children (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000). During family transitions, the sibling subsystem, if intact, offers "continuity ... within the reorganization" (Drapeau et al., 2000, p.77; Schibuk, 1989) and help with transition to a new environment (Hegar, 1988). In families where there is insufficient parenting influence, the ambiguity may push children to their sibling(s) for information and help (Hegar, 1988). For example, it is not unusual that the care of young children in neglectful families is often delegated to older siblings (Grigsby, 1994). In the absence of "reliable parental care," children turn to siblings for support, leading to "the development of strong sibling bonds" (Grigsby, 1994, p. 270).

Additionally, because children don't really differentiate between good and bad—they see life and relations as familiar and unfamiliar—when children are traumatized by removal from their families, it is their siblings to whom they turn because they represent familiarity. What professionals and those outside the family judge as questionable or unacceptable family functioning, children tend to see as normal and customary. Although siblings within the same abusive or neglectful family may experience the family environment differently, the environment to them feels normal and rational. When removed, siblings do not seek to deidentify with each other as is the case with a sibling subgroup in which one sibling is seen by another as disturbed or different in some way (Schachter & Stone, 1987). Rather, within the context of these problematic families, sibling relations intensify. Without access to that sibling relation, their trauma often increases (Hegar, 1988).

Siblings in Temporary Care

Foster care is designed to be a temporary situation for children whose safety has been or would be compromised significantly if they lived with their family. When children enter temporary care, efforts are made to minimize the trauma by maintaining children in a single placement. Caseworkers try to ensure that they spend no more time in temporary care than is necessary for their safety and well being and try to choose the placement most suitable for promoting their physical, social, and emotional development. Progressive legislation has sought to eliminate the foster care drift that characterized the state of children's placements in the past and to promote better outcomes for children. Practice wisdom and limited research support the basic premise that children experience better outcomes when placed with their siblings. These outcomes include greater stability, fewer emotional and behavioral problems, fewer placements, and fewer days in placement,.

In a study of sibling placements, Staff and Fein (1992) noted, "Siblings placed together were more likely to stay in their first placement than those placed separately" (p. 257). Furthermore, the number of disruptions for siblings placed

together and siblings placed alone was the same (Staff & Fein, 1992). Thorpe and Swart (1992) confirmed that sibling placements were more stable than those of separated siblings in that separated siblings experienced more placements. Drapeau et al. (2000) found that "children with split sibling groups experience more instability than those with intact sibling groups. On average, children in foster care who are in the split sibling group have a greater number of previous placements" (p. 83). Finally, in a retrospective study of closed case records, Grigsby (1994) found that the average "duration of placement for children placed with siblings was shorter (13 months) than for siblings not placed together (17.9 months)" (p. 275).

Smith (1998) found that children placed apart from their siblings had more emotional and behavioral problems, including depression and aggression. Smith (1998) speculated that support from older siblings helps decrease the development of emotional and behavior problems for the younger siblings. Children placed together offer the continuance of part of the child's own family life, which can be critical in a child's adjustment to a new home. Kagan and Reid (1986) suggested that a stable child might be an asset for the sibling who is emotionally disturbed. Even a needy child does not necessarily benefit from being the only child in a family (Hochman et al., 1992; Ward, 1984). The child placed alone may find the intensity of family relations overwhelming without siblings serving as a buffer.

When children cannot be reunited with their families, efforts are made to place them in permanent adoptive homes. If, while in temporary care, children have been separated for a number of months (or years) from their siblings, a strain can occur in the relationship. Separated siblings have obviously had different experiences in their respective foster homes. Despite caseworkers' best efforts in sustaining contact through regular visitation, the bond between siblings is affected. The separation impacts how children now see their role in their sibling group and how they relate to one another. Whether siblings are separated or together, attempts to unify children in permanent homes can create some unique challenges.

Siblings in Permanent Care

One finds mixed results when reviewing the data on sibling placements and adoption disruption—that is, the termination of the family relationship before legal adoption. Results from earlier research suggested that placing siblings in the same home increases the risk of disruption (Boyne, Denby, Kettenring, & Wheeler, 1984; Kadushin & Seidl, 1971). For example, 3 decades ago Kadushin and Seidl (1971) indicated that 28% of sibling placements ended in disruption versus 1% of single-child placements. However, it should be noted that a relationship between age and sibling placements was found. The average age of children in single

placements was 4 years and of children in sibling placements 7 years. This suggests that age at placement may have played a role in the disruption of sibling placements, confounding the simple conclusion that sibling placement increases risk for problems.

Other researchers have reported no association between sibling placement and disruption. Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, and Carson (1988) found that sibling placements (33%) were no more likely to be disrupted than single-child placements (35%). However, sibling placements for children older than 15 tended to disrupt more than single-child placements for children of the same age. Results from related research on adoption impact—the effect of adoption itself on children, which is another indicator of risk for problems in adoption—did not show that sibling placements were negatively related to adoption outcome (Rosenthal & Groze, 1990).

Moreover, some researchers (Festinger, 1986; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988) found sibling placement for older children to be associated with a reduced risk of disruption. Festinger (1986) indicated that children who were placed alone disrupted from the adoptive family at the rate of 10.7% compared with 5.6% for children who were placed with siblings. There were no significant differences in the age of the two groups at the time of placement. Of the children who were placed alone in Festinger's study, 11.9% had siblings placed in other adoptive homes. Of the separated siblings, over 90.0% were believed to have moderate to severe problems. Supporting Festinger's research, Rosenthal et al. (1988) found that as the age of the child increased, the risk of disruption increased for nonsibling groups; however, for sibling groups there was no linear association between the age of the child and sibling group placement. This means that older children placed alone showed an increased likelihood of adoption, but older children placed with their sibling group did not increase the risk for disruption.

Finally, in a 4-year longitudinal study in which Groze (1996) examined siblings placed separately and together, he found differences between siblings placed apart and siblings placed together on several dimensions of parent–child relations, although there was no trend in this pattern over time. The major difference was that siblings placed together did not have the same type of relationship with their adoptive parents as the siblings placed separately did, which provided partial support for the importance of the sibling bond. The sibling group as a subsystem within the larger family system formed a unique and strong bond that affected the quality of parent–child relations. These relations were not problematic, but different in intensity. In addition, siblings who were separated showed more anxiety/depression, which also provides limited support about the effects of being separated. Anxiety/depression may be the symptoms demonstrated as a result of being separated from one's sibling(s).

Placing Siblings Together: Barriers in Child Welfare

As of September 30, 1999, the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information reported that there were 568,000 children in out-of-home care settings. Of those, 48% were in family foster homes and 26% were in relative foster homes (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 1999). Results from earlier studies indicated that of the children in foster care, 93% had full, half, or step siblings (Timberlake & Hamlin, 1982), and up to 85% of children entered foster care with a sibling (Wedge & Mantle, 1991). According to Hochman et al. (1992), 30% of the children entering foster care are sibling groups of four or more. In a recent study in Ohio (Wells & Guo, 2000), over 66% of the children in foster care were found to have an identifiable sibling also in the system. The sheer number of children in out-of-home care, an obvious challenge to sibling placement, is not decreasing, but increasing, and this is unlikely to change. Yet other barriers to sibling placement can be addressed once they are identified.

Placement Philosophy

When children enter foster care, child welfare workers are faced with the question of whether it is better to place all brothers and sisters together or place siblings individually or in subgroups. This issue emerges again once permanent custody (termination of parental rights) is obtained, and decisions must be made around securing a permanent home. Although few facts are available to give practice direction beyond case-specific examples (Wedge & Mantle, 1991), it appears that factors affecting placement decisions regarding siblings include worker and agency philosophy (Jones & Niblett, 1985; Ward, 1984; Corcran-Rumpppe K, & Groze, 1993).

For the most part, child welfare workers believe siblings should be placed together, but their actions are sometimes inconsistent. Jones and Niblett (1985) found that professionals at a workshop on placement of siblings did not consistently support the assumption that siblings should be kept together unless there was a compelling reason to separate them. Professionals immediately started evaluating the pros and cons of keeping siblings together, which is an approach that starts with the premise that siblings should not necessarily be kept together. As professionals considered the merits and deficits of keeping siblings together, personal values could have considerable impact on professional decisions (Jones & Niblett, 1985).

Grigsby (1994) noted that, for the most part, the records of children who were placed apart as siblings did not contain information regarding sibling visitation. He concluded that the caseworkers needed further training in understanding the importance of these attachment relationships (Grigsby, 1994). Smith (1996) interviewed caseworkers regarding sibling placement. Results indicated that although caseworkers acknowledged that their agency policy was to "place siblings together unless it (was) in the best interests of the children to make separate placements," other barriers existed in implementing the policy (Smith, 1996, p. 369).

Philosophy drives the direction of practice in sustaining sibling ties. However, difficulties emerge if an agency does not invest in maintaining sibling relationships beyond establishing a philosophy. Unless child welfare workers secure and devote the necessary resources to solving this problem, sibling relationships will remain vulnerable. Problems can include not having enough available and appropriate foster and adoptive homes to support the number of siblings entering care because of poor programming regarding recruitment, not having enough workers to cover caseloads and ensure the appropriate decisions are made regarding sibling placement, not having appropriate casework training in the area of sibling relationships, and not having community support to assist foster and adoptive families who care for sibling groups.

The Limitations of Temporary and Permanent Homes

It takes special families to provide temporary and permanent care to children who have been abused and neglected. Licensed foster and adoptive families typically indicate preferences regarding the number and types of children they feel they would be best suited to care for in their home. This could limit some aspects of availability. Yet when given the opportunity, many families accept placements outside their original preferences. Other limitations of foster and adoptive homes include too few foster and adoptive homes available, limited physical space to accommodate large sibling groups, a lack of information about the waiver process—that is, exceptions that can be made to allow siblings to be placed together—and the need for various supports to sustain siblings together in temporary and permanent placements.

Siblings are separated when there are too many siblings compared with the licensed and available foster and adoptive homes. The shortage of homes is a constant challenge because the number of children in care continues to rise. Over half of the caseworkers in Smith's (1996) study indicated that it was difficult to "find foster families willing to accept sibling groups" (p. 370). Consequently, agencies do not have the luxury of preserving homes that can and will accommodate large sibling groups. Sometimes families may be licensed for several children but have other children already in the home. These overlaps in placement can result in a separation of siblings.

Also, the size of the proposed blended family (adoptive or foster family and sibling group) is cited as a reason for not placing a sibling group together. The amount of physical space required for each child per licensing rules can prohibit the number of children that can be placed in a home (Smith, 1996). In some cases, waivers are available. However, work-

ers are not always knowledgeable about the waivers and how to access them, or there is a lack of flexibility or willingness on the part of an agency to utilize waivers.

Because many abused and neglected children enter into care with complex needs, foster and adoptive families require assistance to cope successfully with those needs. The support that families need ranges from respite—a break from the children—and financial assistance to therapeutic interventions, including individual counseling for children and family counseling. Often there is a misconception that foster and adoptive families come readily equipped to handle the issues that emerge with fostering or adopting sibling groups. In truth, they require help within their community to care for children, often more so than other families. To fail to provide services to assist families with their needs is to increase the stress on the developing family system, placing them at great risk for negative (adoption) outcomes (Groze, 1996).

Defining the Sibling Relationship

The diversity of families in society has resulted in changes to the way families define their relationships. This is especially true of the sibling relationship. Siblings entering care may be full siblings, half-siblings, or have a kinship relationship that resembles the sibling relationship. Trying to sort through the nature and quality of the relationship in order to make appropriate decisions regarding placement is challenging. Attitudes about the quality of the relationship can interfere with making a good placement decision.

The Special Needs Challenge

Children who have been abused and neglected often enter care with a variety of special needs, including physical, social, and emotional problems. There is concern that the needs of individual siblings entering care may be different, and placing siblings together will meet only one child's needs or only the needs of part of the group. Perhaps one child has more difficulties or has suffered more physical or emotional abuse, or one child has played the major caretaking or parental role before entering care. The belief is that by separating children, families can better meet the individual needs of children and can foster healthy interactions (Ward, 1984). The fear is that keeping them together will result in harm to the children and increase the risk of disruption for all of the children.

Sibling interaction can also be a special challenge and is another factor that influences placement decisions. Siblings who seem to relate well are more likely to be placed together, whereas sibling conflict or rivalry is often used to justify decisions of splitting of children. When children are separated because of rivalry or conflict, it teaches them that the way to deal with conflict is to leave rather than to work it out (Hochman et al., 1992). Separating siblings, however problematic interactions may have been, may produce a different type of trauma in the child. Moreover, if sibling interactions are problematic, separating siblings allows little opportunity to correct negative interactions.

Siblings Can't Always Be Together

Despite the best efforts of an agency to try to place siblings together, there are situations that prevent this from happening. For example, siblings are separated when one or more of the siblings are placed in foster care while the other sibling(s) remains in the birth family (Wedge & Mantle, 1991). In many situations, siblings who remained in the home subsequently enter care, but the sequential entrance into the child welfare system (i.e., they enter after each other) can result in separation. Separating siblings when they enter care contributes to their continued separation in adoption planning, regardless of their interaction with each other (Ward, 1984).

Additionally, significant safety concerns may exist between siblings. Sometimes siblings who have lived in abusive and neglectful families adopt the behaviors of the perpetrators in (or out of) their home, and children end up harming each other. A common example is the child who has been sexually abused who in turn perpetrates sexual abuse upon a younger sibling. Depending on the nature of the abuse, it is sometimes necessary to separate children in these situations until the issues of safety are resolved to the extent that, with the appropriate care, services, and supervision, the children will not be in a position to hurt each other.

When siblings are separated, it becomes much more difficult to help them sustain their sibling attachment. Not all children who are separated end up living in the same community, causing difficulty with visitation. Even in the best circumstances when children are separated and live in the same community, it can still be difficult to ensure that regular and consistent contact occurs. The separation can have a lifelong impact.

Best Practice Solutions

Once barriers to placing siblings together are identified, agencies can begin to evaluate resources and determine what kinds of solutions are possible. Clearly some best practice solutions depend on the resources available to an agency. The commitment must begin with agency philosophy and extend to agency procedures and worker training. There must also be homes available to sustain temporary and permanent care of siblings as well as the necessary community support. In addition, to aid caseworkers in ensuring careful consideration of all factors involved in sibling placement, a case decision-making model is helpful. When there is no alternative but to place siblings apart because of safety or other issues, all efforts should be made to help them sustain their sibling bond.

Philosophy and Practice: Begin at the Beginning

The hallmark of creating best practice begins with philosophy. Philosophy infiltrates most aspects of an agency's inner workings. It becomes operationalized in written policies and procedures and instigates the revision of forms and processes. It becomes the focus of casework training and stimulates new programming such as innovative recruitment strategies for securing foster and adoptive families (discussed below). Changing, adjusting, or creating agency philosophy in regard to sibling placement is a first step toward creating opportunities for children to sustain their sibling relationships. Absent a compelling reason, siblings should always be placed together, and the agency that has such a clearly stated policy can move forward with best practice.

Operationalizing a philosophy of sibling-centered placement practice requires a thorough review of existing policies and procedures, and it requires establishing procedures that don't exist. Policies and procedures should reflect careful assessment and consideration of sibling relationships from the point of intake, whether children are entering care or not, through the process of securing a child a permanent home. Procedures to consider include how the agency collects and maintains information regarding siblings, how the sibling relationship is assessed (see *Case Decision Making Around Sibling Placement* in this article), how removal of children from their home is undertaken (including the procedure for conducting relative searches), and the how reunification with the family proceeds.

Additionally, if siblings are separated, procedures should be in place to expedite their reunification in one home if appropriate, and if not, to provide for regular and consistent visitation (see When Siblings Are Separated: Sustaining Sibling Ties). Furthermore, if children reach the point of needing an adoptive home, procedures need to be in place to ensure that sibling ties are maintained either through placement together in a permanent home or other significant kinds of contact.

From the point at which a family becomes involved with an agency, efforts can be made to collect information about siblings. For example, proceduralizing the use of genograms at intake can be helpful to document information about siblings. The advantage of this is having information early on about the nature of the sibling relationship and risks to the children if they enter care. The genogram can also be used later to help a child understand their placement and sibling history. Another system to put in place or update is a management information system—that is, the way in which an agency collects and maintains (computer) data about families and children—that accurately links siblings regardless of their custody status. In the event that children enter placement at different times, information is at hand to make a more informed decision about placement together.

Another procedure to consider is removal from the home. A comprehensive and thorough relative search is a critical part of the process. Neglecting this aspect puts children at significant risk of unnecessary removal from their extended family and exposes them to the trauma associated with foster care. Again, proceduralizing the use of the genogram is helpful in collecting information up front and throughout the life of the case about relatives and others most familiar with the sibling group. While children are in temporary care, a process should exist that compels workers to continue a thorough relative search.

If children cannot be with relatives or other kin, decisions, sometimes in an instant, must be made about their placement in foster care. An agency operating on the philosophy of keeping siblings together absent a compelling reason to separate them should have a procedure in place to automatically evaluate first those resources that can accommodate all of the siblings together. If this is not possible, families who live in close proximity to one another and families who are willing to allow frequent contact between the siblings are the next best alternatives. Even if initial separation occurs, careful consideration should be given to re-place siblings if there is an opportunity early on to place them together in one home.

No child should spend one more day in temporary placement than is necessary to ensure his or her safety and well-being. Given this, a procedure for family reunification decision making is imperative. The point at which risk is reduced and a child's safety can be reasonably assured should be the point that the child reenters the family home. All too often, workers become entrenched in the notion that a family must complete all services under the case plan in order for children to return home. However, services do not reduce risk to children, though they may help measure changes in behavior, and these may be changes that reduce risk. Because the chances of children returning home are significantly reduced following the first 3 months of

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placement, the reunification procedure should include a regular review process that occurs throughout the duration of the child's placement, but specifically reviews that occur early on in the placement. This can increase the possibility for siblings who are separated to be reunited in their birth home.

Creation and revision of procedures necessitates revision of forms. All forms associated with placement processes should be revised to reflect the careful attention paid to siblings entering care. Such forms might include intake forms and placement questionnaires. Furthermore, the agency management information system should be advanced and updated to link information about siblings who enter care at different points in time, making it possible to consider placement together.

Once procedures have been appropriately revised and written and associated forms and processes reflect the necessary information, caseworkers should be trained. Training should include the information about the philosophy, the procedures, and the rationale for making all efforts possible to place siblings together. The research about outcomes for siblings placed together and separately should be included as part of training. Also, because decision making can be complex, an assessment tool (see Figure 1) should be developed to help workers systematically and consistently address the areas associated with sibling placement. Each area of the assessment tool and its importance in the decision-making process is discussed below.

It is worthy to note here the importance of the inclusion of the community in training around sibling relationships and placement. The community, including the legal system, can play a critical role in the success (or failure) of sibling placements. It is imperative that individuals, including attorneys, guardian ad litems, judges, mental health professionals, teachers, child developmental specialists, and others, be given the opportunity to learn about and become invested

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Figure 1. *Factors in a Multidimensional Assessment of Sibling Placements*

Description of Sibling Relationship
> Type/Degree
>
> Duration
>
> Intensity
>
> Quality

Safety Issues
> Risk factors
>
> Context of risk factors
>
> Services/interventions employed to reduce or effectively manage risk
>
> Response to services/interventions

Benefits experienced by the children for keeping siblings together
> Children do not have to experience another loss (can begin to heal)
>
> Children have a shared history (sense of roots)
>
> Children learn to work through their problems rather that running from them
>
> Children feel safer in a new home when they are with their siblings
>
> Children are better able to attach to caregivers when the sibling attachment has not been damaged
>
> Children have other people in the family that look like them
>
> Children have a shared biological/genetic history that that can be used to predict future physical/medical needs based on the eldest child

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Benefits for separating siblings
> The child is living with a family that they have resided with for a significant period of time and has formed an attachment; moving them will result in a significant loss
>
> The child will be physically and emotionally safer remaining separated
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> The child has such special needs that separating him/her will allow the family to meet those needs

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Children's wishes and expectations

Families available to provide permanence
> Family values about sibling relations
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> Family willingness to accept and experience with services to preserve siblings together

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in the process of sustaining sibling relationships. Agency-sponsored cross-training is a useful strategy that can both facilitate the flow of information about sibling issues and promote community ownership in meeting children's needs.

Supporting and Sustaining
Temporary and Permanent Homes

Families who provide temporary and permanent care for abused and neglected children require special attention and support in order to be utilized to their fullest potential. Several strategies can be used to address issues around foster and adoptive homes, including specialized recruitment for homes that will care for siblings as well as knowing the families who are licensed and their philosophies about keeping siblings together. Also, when families are interested in sibling care but space or other issues exist, knowing the waiver process is helpful. Knowing how to use the homes that are available most appropriately and providing the necessary support both before and after permanence are also critical.

To begin, an aggressive and sustained recruitment campaign for foster and adoptive families who can and want to parent siblings is essential. The home-study process in licensing families for foster care and/or adoption should include an evaluation of the family's values about sibling relations. Moreover, families need to be assessed as to both their willingness to accept siblings and their willingness to accept services that may support and strengthen sibling bonds. It is also important to have flexibility in licensing requirements so that even if a foster family is licensed for only two or three children, the requirement can be waived when a group of siblings enter foster care and the family is willing to care for them.

Because abused and neglected children often enter care with special physical, social, and/or emotional needs, the families who care for them need access to affordable formal and informal services that assist in strengthening and preserving the family. For example, making family preservation services available to foster and adoptive families of sibling groups could be helpful in preventing disruptions. Other incentives might include providing homemaker services, supplying transportation, providing assistance with purchasing household items that are needed, paying foster homes a stipend to stay open for large sibling groups, and providing no- or low-interest loans or subsidized housing additions for adoptive families willing to take in large sibling groups.

Case Decision Making Around Sibling Placement

As philosophy and accompanying procedures and training are put into place along with the strategies for supporting and sustaining foster and adoptive homes, consistent case decision making must also occur. Because the decisions around sibling placement can be complex, a multidimensional assessment is useful. During this assessment, the case-worker should consider the nature of the sibling relationship, issues around placement of the siblings together (including possible risk factors), the benefits of keeping children together or separating them, the child's wishes and expectations, and the families available to provide care.

First, the complexity of the sibling relationship requires careful analysis in making best practice decisions regarding placement. The first part of the assessment is to describe the sibling relationship fully and accurately in terms that are concrete, observable, and measurable. The degree or type, duration, quality, and intensity of the relationship are all important factors to consider in the assessment.
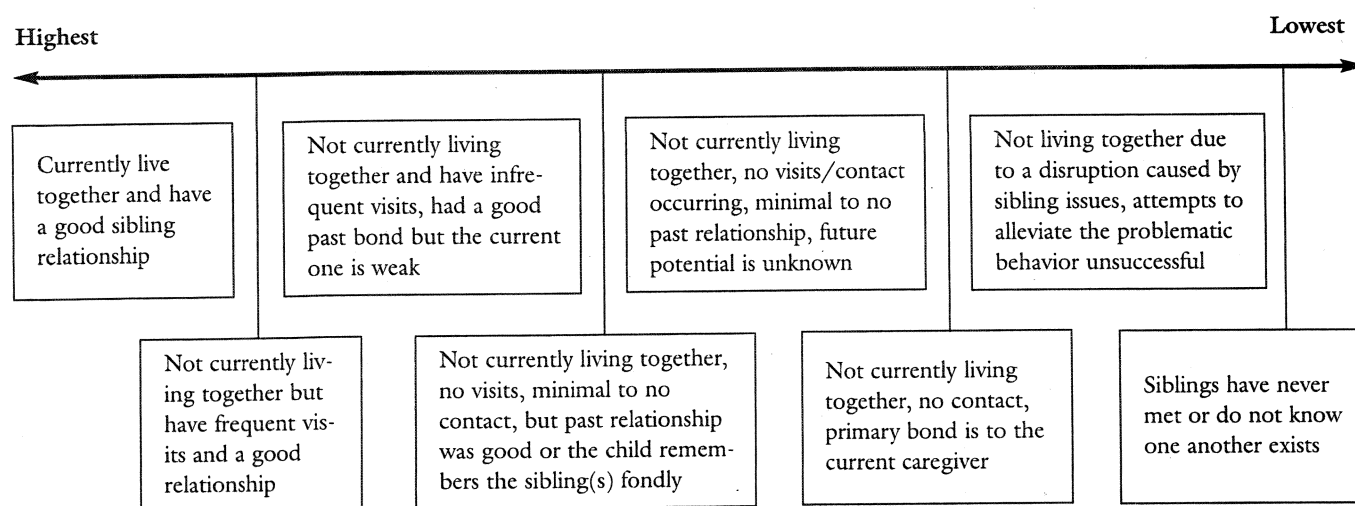
Regarding degree or type, siblings can be characterized as full siblings (they share two biological parents), half siblings (they share only one biological parent), or assumed siblings (they share no common biology but have been raised together and they assume that they are). Duration includes the length of time the siblings have known each other, their developmental stage, and significant circumstances. The length of time is straightforward. The older child will know the youngest child the longest. However, the developmental stage of the child is important to consider. For very young children, a few hours is long enough to make a significant connection whereas the connection may take longer for an older child. So, a few days to a 1-year-old may be the equivalent to a month to a 2-year-old—time is variable in children's minds as a result of developmental age and is an important consideration in the assessment.

Figure 2 demonstrates that intensity is greatest for siblings who have a current relationship and lowest in cases where sibling relations have not yet developed. This guideline, along with the other components of the assessment, can provide a comprehensive view of sibling relations.

The third area to assess is the quality of sibling relations. At the basic level, quality is a continuum from good to bad. The quality of sibling relationships can change over time depending on the family and social context. Quality cannot be assessed at one given point in time or without consideration of what is happening around the siblings in their family, at school, in the neighborhood, at church or synagogue, or with their peers. Careful attention should be paid to understanding how abuse and neglect can put children in different roles. For example, it is not unusual for older children to play a caretaking role with a younger sibling. This is not necessarily a negative quality of the relationship and should not be used to justify separating siblings. With the appropriate care, both children can develop appropriate roles with each other so that the older child can be helped to be a child again and the younger child can learn to trust adults (Hochman et al., 1992).

Of equal importance are the significant circumstances in the lives of the siblings. According to Terr (1990), traumatized children often experience time distortions and distortions of sequence of events. Practitioners should not

Figure 2. *Model for Examining Intensity of Sibling Relations*

Highest   Lowest

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| Currently live together and have a good sibling relationship | Not currently living together and have infrequent visits, had a good past bond but the current one is weak | Not currently living together, no visits/contact occurring, minimal to no past relationship, future potential is unknown | Not living together due to a disruption caused by sibling issues, attempts to alleviate the problematic behavior unsuccessful |

| Not currently living together but have frequent visits and a good relationship | Not currently living together, no visits, minimal to no contact, but past relationship was good or the child remembers the sibling(s) fondly | Not currently living together, no contact, primary bond is to the current caregiver | Siblings have never met or do not know one another exists |

confuse children's sense of time or discount a child's inability to remember events and sequences around siblings or sibling relations as an indication that the relationship with the sibling was of insufficient duration to be meaningful. This inability may be developmental or may be the result of trauma that has yet to be resolved.

As part of the assessment, it is important to evaluate how siblings experience or express sibling rivalry. Often, children will feel safer expressing anxiety or anger with a sibling than with an adult. Some children have had to participate in acts resulting in the victimization of their siblings or may feel guilty for their failure to protect or for not having received the same type of mistreatment. All of these factors will play into the nature and quality of the relationship. Quality assessment is a combination of evaluation by time, by family, and by social context.

The next major issue to assess once the sibling relationship has been fully described is safety. This assessment describes any risk factors associated with the children being placed together. Risk factors include sexual reactivity, such as inappropriate sexual touching or fondling between siblings or sexual offending in which an older or more powerful child victimizes a younger or less powerful child; they also include aggression that results in physical harm. However, these behaviors are not necessarily sufficient reason to separate siblings.

When siblings have exhibited these behaviors with each other, a practitioner must first consider the context of this behavior; that is, the practitioner must have a good understanding of the dynamics of the situation(s) in which this behavior occurs. Second, there needs to be an evaluation as to whether any intervention has been attempted to try to change these behaviors and the results of any treatment. This information can assist the practitioner in predicting the

likelihood of these behaviors recurring and what treatment interventions may be effective. If the risk of these behaviors is high, the children's response to treatment has been minimal, and a family cannot be found that will tolerate extreme behaviors, placing siblings apart can be considered. Once the decision is made, the practitioner and prospective families should explore how to maintain sibling ties even though the children will be in separate locations. In addition, effort must be made to assist the siblings with loss and grief issues as they separate from each other.

The third factor to consider is the weighing of long-term benefits of keeping siblings together compared with the benefits of separating them. Sometimes the decision-making process about siblings starts with this part of assessment without completing the first two components of the assessment as described above. The danger is that the liabilities are then explored without the background and context for exploring the benefits. See Figure 1 for benefits of keeping siblings together or separating them. A paradox about attachment is that if children have attached to one parent figure, they are more like to be able to attach to other parent figures. At the same time, to disrupt the attachment is to have the child experience yet another loss, and the loss experience will affect subsequent attachments.

The fourth factor to assess is the children's expectations and wishes. Abused and neglected children deal with multiple loyalty and safety issues that can affect their ability to make healthy decisions for themselves. Many are probably unable to take into consideration the longevity of the sibling relationship, and they may base their decision solely on their current relationship with their siblings or the significant adult in their life. Also, their developmental age must also be considered when evaluating their wishes. At the point of seeking permanent placement, it is also important to

recognize that children with a history of multiple separations and rejections may express a desire not to be adopted because of loyalty to an absent sibling or not to move, even if it means reunification with siblings.

The last factor to consider is the families who are available for children. As part of this assessment, the family's values about sibling relations need to be explored. In addition, families need to be evaluated not only on their current willingness to accept siblings but also on their willingness to accept services that may support and strengthen sibling bonds. These factors are part of the comprehensive and multidimensional assessment that should be employed as a best practice in evaluating decisions about siblings. Figure 1 gives an idea of the relative ranking of each dimension of the assessment.

When Siblings Are Separated: Sustaining Sibling Ties

When keeping siblings together is not an option either at the time of entry into foster care or at the time of adoption, there are several strategies that can help siblings sustain attachment to one another. This can include placement of subsets of siblings together, face-to-face visits, letters, and phone calls. Siblings can and in some cases should be seen jointly in therapy sessions. Processes should also be in place for regular and timely reviews of all sibling placements when children are separated.

Often, separation of siblings occurs when there is an emergency placement. However, there may still be opportunities to place sibling subsets together. This may mean that a younger child is placed with an older child and the middle children are placed together, or the boys are placed together and the girls are placed elsewhere. Efforts should be made to keep the siblings in close proximity to each other, preferably in the same neighborhood. For large child welfare systems that rely on private foster care providers, siblings should be kept within the same private agency. It is equally important to make sure that all the children know where the others are going and when they will see each other again and to write down this information for each child because most children will not remember the details during this traumatic time.

When siblings are separated, visitation between siblings should be a priority. A procedure should exist that specifies how often visits are to occur and who is responsible for coordinating visits and providing transportation. Developing a detailed contract with the families providing care that specifies the maximum time between visits, frequency of phone contact between siblings, and plans for keeping current the addresses and phone numbers of all the siblings that is freely and easily given to the children will help ensure frequent and timely contact. The child welfare worker in these cases should assist with early visitations and monitor them to ensure follow through.

Whether children are placed in separate temporary or permanent homes, barring geographical difficulties, children may enter therapy together. The therapeutic setting can lend itself to children having a safe environment to talk about their feelings about the separation from their parents and separation from each other. Children, especially older children, have an opportunity to work through anxiety they may be feeling about how their siblings are adjusting to placement, where they are and what kind of care they are receiving.

When siblings must remain separated for an extended period of time, this should be flagged by the agency for review because it is an exemption to policy. Reviews should occur immediately following placement and at regularly scheduled times thereafter, keeping in mind that the longer children remain in placement and separated, the less likely it is that they will reunite in a permanent setting. The decision making about the case should be in full consultation with a team. The team should include (to the extent possible) the birth parents, relatives, foster parents, child welfare caseworker, supervisor, guardian ad litem/court advocate, service providers involved with the family, and, when appropriate, the children. It is also important that whenever possible, one caseworker should be assigned to all the children, regardless of whether they are residing in the same family.

Conclusion

Decisions regarding sibling placement can be difficult. Operating from the basic philosophy that siblings should be placed together unless there is a compelling reason to separate them is consistent with best practice. Fully incorporating this philosophy into agency policies and procedures and ensuring workers are well trained in the area of sibling-centered placement are critical. It is also necessary to devote time and resources to the recruitment and support of foster and adoptive families. Factors related to good decision making include conducting a comprehensive assessment of the sibling relationship, completing an evaluation of the risks associated with placing siblings together, and reviewing the benefits of keeping siblings together versus separating them. Children's wishes and expectations should also be appropriately considered, as well as the availability of appropriate families who are devoted to keeping siblings together.

Decisions made around sibling placement at the time of entry into foster care through adoption are critical in the life of a child. Barriers to placement do exist. However, agencies that invest in sustaining sibling relationships by working to overcome barriers and devoting all available resources to keeping siblings together will help ensure better outcomes for children. It can mean the difference between children having support through a traumatic family transition or not, children being stable in temporary

placement while they waits for their permanent home or not, and children having the opportunity to sustain a significant lifelong relationship or not.

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